

One-Hit Wonder (With Two) by listlessness

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Summary:

Nancy has always found herself on the periphery of relationships, trying to find a way to wedge herself in. She likes it there, without the ties to keep her in place.

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Author's Note:

it's been a long time since i've written anything. this is not how i expected it to turn out, but i just have a lot of a feelings about these idiots. what was intended to be just a weird smut piece with steve and jonathan going at it in front of nancy turned into an emotional dump.

It started off simply enough. Although the gaming sessions had started to peter out once the boys entered high school, they all still came over once a week over the weekend, just to chat or work on homework together. Sometimes they'd start up the campaign from where it had ended the previous time, but it was becoming a rarity as the term progressed. Even so, each Saturday or Sunday afternoon, depending on their schedules, Jonathan would come by with Will and, on occasion, Steve would swing by with Dustin. At first it was awkward; none of the teens were much inclined to be in close proximity for very long. Jonathan would make his excuses right off the bat, sometimes saying he had work, sometimes just racing away as soon as he could. Other times Steve would make an attempt at conversation, ask how the two were handling their senior year, before clicking his fingers, cracking his knuckles, and making some remark about needing to go 'do things'.

Nancy took it upon herself to make the first attempt at soothing over their uncomfortable former friendship. Between her and Steve's shared history, and the weak, aborted attempt at a relationship with Jonathan that lasted a few months before fizzling out, she didn't expect things to be easy. She had, though, hoped things would be *easier*. So, during the third weekend of September, she put some pizza rolls in the oven, mixed some lemonade, and waited.

Jonathan arrived first, punctual as always. He held a book in his hand, some thick thing by an author she didn't recognise. After delaying him with some questions about their English assignment, causing him to raise an eyebrow at her in scepticism as Nancy never needed help before, Steve arrived with Dustin in tow. The oven rang

just as Dustin hurried downstairs to the basement, and although Steve went to make his leave, Nancy asked him to stay. He stalled, halfway to the door, eyes on Jonathan. At that, Jonathan went to make his usual excuse, to which Nancy stood between them, hands up, and put her foot down.

'No! Let's just- let's just hang out. Talk. Like we used to.'

'To be fair, we never really- ' Steve started. Jonathan made a shrug in agreement.

Nancy huffed, shot him a glare as she shook her head, and gestured for them to follow her. She was a little surprised when they did, but on later consideration, she decided the smell of cooking pizza rolls was a good lure for teenage boys. Pulling them from the oven, there was a hesitation before she slipped them onto a plate, set it on the kitchen table beside the pitcher of lemonade and sat down at the head. Jonathan and Steve eyed each other warily, before sitting down on opposite sides of Nancy, facing each other like unsure dogs. There was a long pause until Nancy poured each of them a glass.

Their first meal was in silence, with the occasional curse from each of them as the scalding contents burnt each of their mouths. The lemonade was too sour, though Steve seemed to enjoy it, and Jonathan scoffed two rolls before Nancy had finished her first. Even when the meal was completed, the last of the rolls gone and the rest of the lemonade drunk, nobody said anything. She tried to think of something to say, even feign a question about an upcoming test or assignment, but nothing came to her. Steve sucked at his teeth, before saying he had to go. Jonathan didn't hang around much longer, either, scurrying off and leaving Nancy to clean up. He at least thanked Nancy for the meal, whereas Steve had hurried out without looking back. He'd left behind the book- *The Dancers at the End of Time* . She put it aside, for later.

When the two came back to pick up their respective charges, Nancy was upstairs doing her homework. She listened from the doorway, first Jonathan and then Steve. Neither asked for her, and she didn't check up on them, the book forgotten on the kitchen table.

The second time Nancy asked Jonathan to stick around was the start of October. This time she did genuinely have a question about their newest English assignment, having missed the day it was given out due to a cold. As Jonathan went over the instructions, Steve arrived. He spotted the two of them, heads bowed together over the sheet of paper, and hurriedly went to leave when Nancy called over to him.

'Hey! You did *The Grapes of Wrath* for English last year, right?'

Steve gaped, clicked his tongue and shrugged. 'Uh, yeah. Kinda lost me with the breastfeeding part, though.'

'What?' Jonathan asked.

'At the end. This guy gets breastfed.'

'What? Who does?'

'Uh, some guy in the barn. Rose of Sharon breastfeeds him.' There was a long, uneasy pause as the three looked at one another. Then, as he rocked onto the balls of his feet, Steve clapped his hands together and took a step back to the door. 'Anyway, I'd love to stay and- '

'D'you want to help?' Nancy asked, offering out the assignment rubric. 'We've got this report, and Ms Arbuckle tends to recycle them each year. Maybe give us some pointers?'

Confusion lashed Steve's face as he took the page. 'I got a C on this,' he said, reading over the contents, but when Nancy appeared like she wouldn't take no for an answer, he rolled his hands, handed it back and nodded.

It was after the third afternoon, when Steve managed to dig up the old report he'd handed in (and it had been a D+, not a C, which he'd received on his lazy assignment), that things became easier. They sat in Nancy's room, going over the notes the teacher had written, books and pages and pieces of stationery spread out between them. Salty snacks were a peace offering between them, and although Nancy didn't particularly touch them, the boys dived in, devouring whatever was offered. Nancy asked how Steve was finding working full time, and he dodged and dived around the question. Jonathan mentioned

applying for NYU, shyly, the way he did whenever his photography was brought up. Steve fixed him with a stare, told him to do it, and the subject was dropped. Although neither subject seemed strictly off-limits, Nancy had the strong feeling that neither were particularly up for discussion, either.

She asked Jonathan about the book he'd left behind, the sci-fi novel, which seemed to be an anthology of short stories combined into one. He said he'd read half of it, but she was welcome to read it if she wanted to. She shrugged, but kept it on her bedside table all the same.

They sat up there until the kids downstairs yelled they were leaving. Steve carried the cans of Coke downstairs, Jonathan collecting the empty pretzel and chip packets. They farewelled Nancy and her parents, and as they made their separate ways, Nancy could have sworn she saw Steve clap Jonathan on the shoulder and gesture for him to call.

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The following Saturday, the boys walked up to the house together. They hadn't planned it, and Nancy saw both their cars parked on the street. Jonathan had two bottles of soda (diet Coke and Sprite), and Steve had two large pizzas. Will and Dustin had both confiscated a slice each and raced off the moment the door was open. Somehow these afternoons had become a thing, which Nancy capitalised in her head to becoming a *Thing*. It was unexpected but pleasant and, in turn, she began to plan accordingly. She carved out time in her day, set aside homework for classes she and Jonathan shared, set up pillows on the floor because Steve tended to stretch out and lay on it like an overgrown cat.

Her mother began to notice. She'd watch as Nancy gathered up her school work, poured chips into bowls and cut up extra lemons for the lemonade. She stood in the doorway to Nancy's room, waiting to be invited in and allowed to remark about what was happening, because Nancy had had a *Thing* with both boys at one time or another, and whatever this *Thing* was needed to be commented on. Nancy, however, steadfastly ignored her and continued to set up her room. The three of them had been linked by an ever greater *Thing*, which

had tried to tear their bonds apart and had nearly succeeded. Nearly, however, was not entirely.

Their topics of conversation gradually moved away from the excuses of school assignments and overdue homework. They spoke of Nancy's plans beyond high school, as that seemed to be the safest topic beyond Jonathan's future plans and Steve's depressing present. Jonathan spoke of Will's recovery in broad strokes, with his pride in his younger brother bleeding through. Steve dodged all conversation about his plans, until begrudgingly slipping that he may have been considering applying for college again come spring.

Although Nancy wouldn't have said they all became friends again, they certainly became friendly. It wasn't so uncomfortable to bump into Jonathan at school, or Steve at the convenience store. She spied Jonathan and Steve talking outside the local bakery down town one Friday afternoon, as she and some of her girlfriends (in the broadest definition of the word, as she found herself generally tagging along with them) made their Halloween plans. The *Thing*, that existed for a pocket of time in her bedroom, had begun to spread outside, in shared nods and polite smiles, in safe public areas of the greater Hawkins community.

It was Steve who decided they should catch up for Halloween. He was too old of the high school bash, Jonathan was too much of a loner and Nancy- well, she couldn't come up with a reason to not go, but she couldn't come up with much of a reason to go, either, beyond it may have been expected of her. In the end she agreed to moving their weekly catch up to Thursday night, while the party raged on several blocks away.

Steve arrived first. That in itself was unusual, but everyone was meeting at Dustin's house for a change, and Nancy supposed that without needing to stop there, it was likely quicker. He had beer (which Nancy rolled her eyes at), several types of candy as well as a packet of Halloween Peeps solely for her. She was downstairs, ordering pizza, lips and fingers sticky and orange with her second Peep when Jonathan. Her father answered the door, waved him upstairs, and Jonathan nodded at her as he crept up, quiet and his head ducked low.

By the time she headed upstairs, back to her room, laughter was spilling from her ajar bedroom door. Curious, she stuck the rest of the marshmallow in her mouth and poked her head in. Steve was lounging on the ground, a half-eaten candy snake sticking from between his teeth as he playfully smacked Jonathan's ankle, who was lazily sitting in her desk chair, flicking through the bookmarked copy of *Dancers* .

'What's going on?' Nancy asked, closing the door behind her.

'Jonathan's high,' Steve cackled, giving Jonathan's ankle another whack.

Jonathan shook his head, his voice soft as he spoke. 'No, I'm not.'

'Liar!' Steve turned to Nancy, pushing up onto his elbow. 'He's totally high, he's flying.'

'Shut up!'

With a raised eyebrow, Nancy turned to Jonathan. His head was down, the curtains of his hair hiding his face. His eyes, though, when he glanced up at her, were bloodshot, pupils blown. She couldn't place the smell, but she recognised it from the odd party here and there.

'Oh my god,' she whispered, clutching a hand to her mouth. A short laugh came out, which surprised her. 'You totally are.'

'Oh, fuck off,' Jonathan drawled, slouching back in her chair, which for some reason set Steve off into a fresh peal of laughter. He fell backwards, holding his side as Jonathan playfully kicked at him, his shoe connecting with Steve's shin. 'Halloween's a tough time for my mom and I, alright? She barely let Will out without an escort. I just needed to unwind.'

Nancy sat down by Steve's feet, crossing her legs as she helped herself to one of the snakes from the packet that had been opened up. As Jonathan spoke, Steve stretched out, his shirt and sweater riding high as he groped around in his bag and pulled out a can of beer. He offered it, to which both Jonathan and Nancy shook their heads, and

opened it up.

'Where'd you even get it from?' Steve asked, snorting to himself as he cracked open the can. He pushed himself to a sitting position, neck craning up to try to catch a glance at Jonathan's expression.

'Why do you care?'

Steve didn't reply. He just took a long pull from the can, settling back against the leg of the chair Jonathan was slouched on. The room fell into a comfortable silence, Jonathan resting his head in his hand, Steve staring off into space and Nancy sucking on the end of the candy snake. Once, she may have been unsettled to have been in the same room with the two of them, unable to say anything, but now she found it better. That was until Steve started laughing, leaning back to eye Jonathan.

'Holy shit, it was your mom! Your mom got you high!'

'Shut *up* !'

Jonathan shoved Steve away, who was lost in peals of laughter, clutching the can to his chest. The grin on Jonathan's face told Nancy that Steve had been right, and she burst out in fit as well, a dozen questions about Joyce and this supposed pot running through her head. She didn't get a chance to ask any of them, though, as her mother was calling up the stairs about the pizza. She got up, smoothed out her skirt, and left the two boys to laugh and bicker as she went to collect their dinner. When she returned, the laughter had died down. Jonathan was slumped back in the chair, head to the ceiling, as he ran his hand through Steve's hair.

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The weeks passed, and Nancy found herself watching out for Jonathan during school or for Steve in town. They never really stopped to talk aside from a few sentences here and there, polite check-ins and questions that never held much weight. The *Thing* they shared on the weekends seemed to be held exclusively for that. Halloween had been a novelty, a break from the usual. Nancy occasionally looked for Jonathan's expression during the school day,

and if he seemed quieter or a little more distant than usual, her gaze would linger. He'd inevitably catch her staring, and he'd roll his eyes at her, screw up his nose, and she'd laugh behind a hand. Sometimes, though, in rare moments, she'd find him staring out the window and into space, a distant smile on his lips, and she'd wonder what had caught his thoughts. There was never time to ask, though, or a way to find out. Instead, she'd watch him in class, a pen posed between her lips, until she turned away of her own accord.

By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Nancy felt almost comfortable enough to call the three of them friends. A few people still did double takes when they saw her and Jonathan talking by their lockers between classes, or hanging out at his car during lunch. He admitted he'd applied early to NYU, biting his lower lip as he wistfully spoke of heading east and escaping the confines of high school like a snake shedding its skin. She'd also sent her own batch of early applications off, crossing her fingers and towns as the envelopes disappeared into post boxes to be sent around the country, like wishes tied to the strings of balloons. She was halfway through the copy of *Dancers*, and although she had initially been scandalised by the encounters Jherek, Lord Jagged and the Iron Orchid, she soon found herself plodding through it.

It wasn't so hard to speak to Steve, either. She saw him around town on occasion, dressed in drab uniform attire. The tie around his neck looked like a noose, his hair developing a part down the middle that made him disappear into a crowd when he had once stood out. It was only on weekends that he emerged from his office cubicle, polo shirts and jeans transforming him into the boy she had once known. He would arrive early on the weekend, and they'd wait in the lounge room, Steve draping over the furniture as he had years before, dealing with her father's usual interrogation. Although before it had been with an easy smile, though, the corners of his mouth were now pinched, his brows knitting together. Office drudgery was killing him, though he never admitted it.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, the kids had postponed their usual catch-up, the guise of continuing their campaign put on hold. The Sinclairs were heading south to visit family, and the Hendersons had folks coming from the west. Will had also developed a nasty flu, and

Joyce was disinclined to let him out when a cold snap hit. Nancy didn't expect to see Jonathan or Steve that weekend, and yet come 3PM, she was being yelled at by Mike that 'the guys' were here. She opened her door to find Steve and Jonathan, heads bowed in conversation, heading up the stairs. A foil-wrapped dish was balancing in Steve's hand.

'I thought the game was cancelled?' she started, eyeing Mike as he followed them up.

'And a fuck you, too,' Steve shot back, only to receive an elbow to the ribs. Steve looked back at Mike. 'Hey, buddy, remember: don't swear or your grades will be shit.'

'Yeah, whatever,' Mike drawled, rolling his eyes as he breezed past, back to the confines of his own room.

'We brought pie,' Steve continued, holding up the dish.

'Half a pie,' Jonathan clarified. 'My mom made it. It's rhubarb.'

'It has craisins in it. I have no idea what a craisin is, but apparently it's delicious.'

'The game was cancelled,' Nancy finally interrupted, getting a word in. The boys looked at her, waiting. 'You still came?'

'We can eat the pie without you,' Steve said, easing past her and into her room.

Nancy rolled her eyes, ignoring the quirk of Jonathan's lips as he grinned, and went to collect some forks from downstairs. Although she wasn't typically fond of unexpected visitors, there was actually something quite nice about Steve and Jonathan continuing their *Thing*, without the pretence of the game being played downstairs. This *Thing* had become their own. Steve was joking and laughing, Jonathan was smiling, and Nancy-

Well, she was being included. Since Barb's death, she'd never quite felt the closeness that her and her best friend had had. She struggled to connect with the rest of the girls in her year group, having always felt like an outsider. There was nothing that deliberately excluded.

Her interests had never been particularly peculiar or weird, like Mike's. She was interested in the mainstream, she had dated boys before and after the two who currently sat in her bedroom. She had no problem talking to people her age. But she'd always felt misplaced, and had never quite clicked with her peers. But now she had two guys in her bedroom, and they all shared a history, and she felt for the first time like she belonged.

When she returned, Steve and Jonathan were sitting on the chest beside her window, which had been opened, the curtains blowing in the cold breeze. Their backs were to her, the dish sitting at her desk beside the copy of *Dancers*. They were talking, voices low as their heads hung out the window. The smell of smoke wafted towards her, and she hastily shut the door, ready to scold them when they spun around, each holding a cigarette of some kind. Jonathan looked just about ready to leap from the window when Steve grabbed his wrist to stop him.

'Jesus, you can't smoke in here, my mom'll kill you. She'll kill me.'

'Christ, Nancy, calm down, we opened your window,' Steve replied, waving his cigarette outside as though to prove a point.

She could smell the tobacco. She knew the taste of it from Steve's lips, the smell of it from his hair and sweaters, from when he'd been drinking and chain-smoking his way through bouts of anxiety after the fight with the demogorgon. The second smell, though, was more unfamiliar. She only recognised it when she got closer, the same acrid, smoky sense from weeks earlier, the night the kids had gone trick-or-treating and the three of them had camped out in her bedroom.

'Are you getting high in my bedroom?' Nancy gaped.

Jonathan froze, the hand-rolled cigarette posed between his fingers. He looked at it, at her, and then at Steve. After a beat, Steve dropped his hand from Jonathan's wrist and let it fall to his lap.

'Technically no, my head's been out the window,' he said, managing to maintain a serious expression until Steve cackled, smacked him in the chest, and sent him nearly flailing off the chest.

Nancy tried to remain serious. She stormed over, forks clutched in her small fist, and brought them down on Jonathan's head. That only made him laugh harder as he raised his arms to defend himself, falling back against the wall, the thin cigarette caught between his fingers. She couldn't help it; it was rare to see Jonathan smile, even rarer to hear him laugh like that, carefree and head back, as Steve grabbed at his wrist once more to keep him from toppling out the open window.

'You assholes! You could have asked!'

Either they didn't hear or they chose to ignore her. Leaning out the window, Steve took a final drag of his cigarette and extinguished it on the wall outside her bedroom window before letting it drop to the ground. As he leant back in, he took the joint from Jonathan, and it only occurred to Nancy several long seconds after it happened that he took a drag of that, too, before passing it back to him. He got up, staggering on his feet, and petted Jonathan on the head as he walked to Nancy's desk. As Jonathan plucked a fork from Nancy's fist, he offered the joint to her, but she shook her head, too stunned by what had occurred to say anything. Steve returned with the pie, peeled the foil off, and sat on the carpet beside the chest to eat. Jonathan slid down to join him; as an afterthought, Nancy grabbed last month's issue of *Seventeen* to use as a makeshift ashtray.

'You guys are insane,' she muttered, falling down opposite them and leaning up against the bed.

'You dated both of us,' Steve pointed out. He'd already taken two mouthfuls of pie, and Nancy wondered just how much he'd smoked before she had come back in to interrupt them.

The smell, somehow, didn't bother her, though she suspected it should have. It probably should have also gnawed on her more that they'd decided to use her bedroom as a place to smoke and get high, and yet somehow that didn't worry her all that much, either. What did suddenly hit her, though, as the thin, tightly-wrapped cigarette was passed between them as they helped themselves to the pie, was that it was clear this hadn't been the first time they'd shared a cigarette. That fact sat deep in her stomach, as she held the fork between her teeth and watched them eat and smoke in a

companionable silence.

She wanted to ask how many times this had happened. She wanted to ask how often they met up outside these four walls. Instead, she breathed in the pungent smoke and rested her head against the mattress behind her.

The forks scratched over the ceramic dish, Nancy only helping herself to a couple of bites. Her eyes closed, legs stretched out in front of her and ankles crossed. She could feel Jonathan's feet on her left, near her hips. There was a slight noise, the click of the window latch, and then Steve's feet to her right. Downstairs she could hear the echoing of the TV through the house, some game (likely football) playing. There was no need to talk, no need to fill the companionable silence that existed between the three of them. There was sporadic movement from the two in front of her, with her feeling or hearing them move at times. When she finally opened her eyes, the sun had begun to set, the sky outside her window streaked with pink and orange. It made her think of *Dancers*, and the world Jherek and Amelia lived in. If she were Amelia, she wondered, would she have been as tolerant of the people at the End of Time as she was of Steve and Jonathan?

In a soft voice, Steve explained how he had sent off a few college applications. He didn't elaborate where to or to study what. But in quiet tones, he whispered how he was going to get out of Hawkins. It didn't matter how; he was getting out. Jonathan's head lolled towards him, and he smiled with heavy-lidded eyes as Nancy squeezed his ankle, just above the elastic of his sock. They'd all get out, eventually.

By the time they sun had set, Steve had sobered up enough to drive the two of them home. Their shoulders bumped as they crept down the stairs, Jonathan still buzzed with bloodshot eyes. Nancy held the door open for them and waved them off, Steve guiding Jonathan by the cuff of his jacket. He bullied Jonathan into the car and waved once before driving off. The dish, filled with crumbs, still sat on her floor with the cover of *Seventeen* riddled with ash. She picked *Dancers* up off her desk, and sat beside the mess to read.

School broke for Christmas. Nancy spent it being wrestled into oversized sweaters and gaudy, hand-knitted scarves. Jonathan hid out with his family, hiding from the festivities, while Steve, for the first time, actually seemed more like himself. He stopped by, made a passing remark about having already seen Jonathan, and thrust upon her a gift of peppermint bark and a series of personalised notebooks.

'For when you get into Brown.'

'You don't know that.'

'You will.'

Some of her classmates were having a party for New Years. She had been invited; Jonathan hadn't. The three of them met up at eight, agreeing to head over before eleven, but as the minutes ticked by and the hours clicked over, none of them made an attempt to go. The Sinclairs were hosting New Years for the kids, and her parents had plans of their own. The house was theirs, and for once they ventured outside the confines of the bedroom.

The living room became their location of choice. They opened the curtains so they could see the clear night sky, the street lamps outside illuminating the room as they hid behind the sofa. Steve lay on the ground, his legs perched up on the sofa, his hand tucked beneath his head. Nancy joined him, and Jonathan settled beside her, the three in a row. Steve was still dressed in his favourite reindeer sweater, swearing by the Christmas spirit until 'at least the third of January,' with a promise to try to push through to the fourth. One of Jonathan's mixtapes played in the background, a clanging guitar and throbbing bass that Nancy couldn't place, beyond being one of his bands.

She hadn't quite gotten used to the smell of weed, and she'd never let the cigarette pass her lips, but she enjoyed the buzz that hit her when the boys passed it over her. It made her dizzy and made her feel like she simultaneously spinning and floating in the air, like one of inventions from the sci-fi novel. Steve laughed beside her, his hands above his face as he wiggled them. Jonathan had his head tucked into the crook of her neck; his breath was warm, the scratch of stubble on his cheeks itching against her jaw.

'Did you know,' Steve said, as though about to bestow an important fact, 'that all those reindeer were actually girls?'

'What?' Nancy asked, trying to place where this had come from.

'Rudolph. Dash- Donner, Prancer. Santa's... they were slaves. They were *female* slaves.'

'What?' Nancy repeated.

'Male reindeer lose their antlers in winter. Females don't. So. Santa. He got bitches. Mm.'

'You're high.'

'Maybe.'

Steve was quiet as he dropped his hands, one to her belly and the other to his face. There was a yell and then a cheer from outside the house, and Nancy plied Steve's hand from off her stomach to look at his watch in the dim light. Five minutes to midnight. Someone had started calling it too early. Smiling to herself, she let Steve's hand free, and took hold of Jonathan's instead. She set both of them on her stomach, flexed her feet, and shut her eyes.

'So, Nance,' Steve started again. 'What's your resolution? How's 1986 gonna be bigger and better?'

She considered it. End of school, start of college. Moving away from home, possibly to Smith, maybe to Brown if she was really lucky. She had applied for journalism. Her mother had pressed for nursing, but she had stuck to her guns. No more blood and guts for her, unless it was behind the safety of ink and paper.

'I'm gonna shave my head,' she finally said, determined.

There was a pregnant pause. Then,

'Shit. I can't beat that,' Steve said, shaking his head. 'Jon- Jonathan. What about you?'

Silence. Steve lifted his head, smacked Jonathan's shoulder across

Nancy, and gave him a shake. Nancy cracked open an eye to look over.

'Hey, man, you can't fall asleep. There's- there's fireworks, man, y'can't miss 'em.'

'Huh?' Jonathan lifted his head, dazed, and squinted at the two of them. He lifted his hand from Nancy's stomach and rubbed at his eyes, pushing his hair from his face. 'No, I'm up. I'm- um. I'm not shaving my- why're you shaving your head?'

'When I get to college. Really freak mom out.'

Jonathan settled back down beside her. He still seemed confused, his dark eyes, pupils blown wide, fixed on her hair. He took a handful of it, clutched the curls, and hummed as he gave it a good look. She could feel a slight tug and he let go.

'No. Is too pretty.'

'Exactly. Off it goes.'

'Hair's too pretty,' he repeated. Then, with a more determined expression, he reached over her and combed his fingers through Steve's carefully styled hair. 'Your hair's too pretty.'

Nancy half-expected Steve to fuss, as he tended to have done years ago when anyone dared mess with his carefully coiffed job. To her surprise he didn't. He just quietly chuckled, rolling onto his side so he was pressed up against Nancy. He perched his head up on his hand, somewhat leaning into Jonathan's wide palm. Jonathan swayed slightly, running his fingers over Steve's head until his quiff was destroyed and only a mess remained.

Outside, there was another cheer. Midnight, this time at the correct hour. In the distance there were fireworks, though they were too far away to see them. Nancy quietly cheered as she studied the arm in front of her. Everything seemed to move slowly as Steve leant up, closing the distance between him and Jonathan, and kissed him. She watched them, not as surprised as she supposed she should have been, as their mouths moved together. Jonathan's hand moved from

the back of Steve's head to clutch at her curls. Nancy tilted her head, feeling her hair pull, and she let out a quiet 'huh' as she watched them.

She knew how they kissed. She could almost feel it against her own mouth. The way Steve parted Jonathan's lips with his tongue, the way Jonathan breathed in, as though Steve's mouth was pure oxygen. It wasn't too long ago that she had been on the receiving end of one of their kisses, not so long that she couldn't remember. Laying there, she wiggled her feet, fingers dancing along her stomach as they each held one of her hands.

When they broke apart, foreheads pressed together, Nancy again uttered a quiet 'huh', because this *Thing* was an added *Thing*, and she didn't mind as much as she thought she was meant to. They were like Jherek and Lord Jagged, which, she supposed, made her Amelia.

'What's your resolution, Steve?' she asked, because it seemed important.

There was a breath. Steve's hand on her belly had slipped over so the three of them were clutching at each other.

'I'm going to New York,' he admitted, as though whispering his secret to the start of the new year.

Nancy looked back up to the ceiling. Jonathan lay back down first, then Steve, their hands gripped above hers, just below her sternum. She swore she could taste their lips on hers, their breath lingering in the air above her face, as outside the cheers echoed on.

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Jonathan received his acceptance letter first in late January. Bachelors in Photography and Imaging, freshman orientation August 25th. The *Thing* spilled from the Wheeler's household into the Byers house, with a cake and balloons. Nancy sat next to Joyce as she flicked through a photo album, filled with dozens of images, from the first few that Jonathan took on his father's old camera to the one she and Steve had bought two years ago. Jonathan, shy and pink-cheeked, sat on the farthest end, asking if they could please leave,

while Steve perched on the armrest beside him, eating a bowl of craisins. At one point, his hand rested on the back of Jonathan's neck, before pulling away as soon as the bowl was empty.

The affair was much smaller when Nancy's letter arrived in early February. She made Brown, true to Steve's assessment, and she beamed at the prospect of being just a little bit closer to Jonathan. She and her family went out for lunch, and that evening she swanned about in the dress her mother had bought her. The boys clapped politely, until erupting in a fit of laughter. They smoked, Nancy drank one of the beers Steve had brought, and the night grew hazy. She fell asleep with her head against Jonathan's knees, listening to them kiss as they sat on the chest by her window. She awoke with Steve's head on her lap and a messy, lopsided braid running down her shoulder.

The weeks slipped by, and the Nancy found the school year running through her fingers. As Jonathan began to emerge from his shell, like the winter jackets being shed as the seasons changed, Steve's own began to grow. The office tie around his neck tightened, and no amount of coaxing or cajoling seemed to reassure him that he could still go to New York come August, college admission or not. Nancy followed them around town, where they sat in diner booths and at the back of movie theatres, hands held tightly under the seats or Nancy between them in an attempt to play off the second glances and raised eyebrows.

One Friday evening in late March, Nancy found herself with Jonathan to her right, laying in her bedroom. The almost-finished copy of *Dancers* lay across her stomach. The winter snow had melted and the sun began to set later, painting the sky a series of majestic colours that caught the wind chimes she had received from Steve for her birthday. They danced in the early spring breeze, clinking in her open window. Their legs were stretched up her bedroom wall, feet flexing and pointing. Steve was on their lips but neither dared to utter his name.

When he spilled into the room, his tie was loose and top buttons undone. His hair, once neatly parted and gelled into place had fallen into disarray. The pair looked up at him as he hung in Nancy's doorway. The smile said it all, his eyes wide and bright, his cheeks

flushed with joy. He surged into Jonathan's arms before he had had time to stand, and Nancy had enough sense to shut the door behind Steve. The letter fell to the ground, but the course he'd been accepted to didn't matter, nor how late the letter had come.

Steve broke away from Jonathan's arms and mouth long enough to swoop in and pick Nancy up. He spun her around, causing her to squeal as they fell backwards onto the bed. The skirt of her dress rode up and she yelped, shoving it down with a laugh. Smacking her way free, she rolled out of his arms and next to him. He sat up, grabbed at Jonathan, and pulled him down, his arms snaking around him. Nancy knew what it was like, to be pulled into Steve's embrace, to have Jonathan's weight on top of her. Their hands moved as one, Steve's needy and demanding and Jonathan's wanting and giving. One smelt of toner and hairspray, the other of developer and smoke.

They melted into one another, hands sliding under shirts and loosening buttons. She watched, quiet and curious, before slipping off the bed and tip-toeing to the door. She turned the lock, ear pressed to it as though expecting to hear someone on the other side. When she couldn't make out any tell-tale signs of someone eavesdropping, she looked back over her shoulder to where Jonathan and Steve lay on her bed.

Their hands were everywhere. Steve's office shirt had spilled open, starchily white over her bedspread. Jonathan's hands were raking up the sides of his body as Steve tried to hitch a leg around his hips, much the way he had done when they were being intimate years earlier. She couldn't recall this intensity, though, this heat that radiated off them as the two bucked up against her mattress. Steve pulled at Jonathan's t-shirt, trying to force it up and over.

Nancy didn't want to interrupt them. She didn't want to touch them or break the spell that had washed over them. But she approached, stockinged feet on carpet, and closed the distance between her and the bed. Kneeling where she once lay, she took the hem of Jonathan's shirt and pulled it over, smoothly slipping it over his head and arms before tossing it aside. Steve's hands gripped at Jonathan's shoulders, clutching at him as he arched up.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even move. She couldn't just sit

there and watch, heart in her throat and fingers in the duvet, but she didn't know how to get up. The sight of the two of them, utterly lost in one another, compelled her to stay still, mould into the bed; her nerves got the better of her, though, and as much as she wished to linger, she found herself equally compelled to flee. Biting her lower lip, she went to slip away, perhaps to leave the room, when Jonathan's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. Their eyes met; Steve leant up, nipping at Jonathan's jaw, his own golden-brown eyes sliding over to meet Nancy's. Barely daring to breathe, she settled back on the bed and ever so slowly lay down beside them. Her legs tucked up underneath her, her skirt smoothed out over her knees, as her arm folded under her head to keep it propped up so she could more clearly.

'I'm so proud of you,' Jonathan whispered into Steve's ear. ' So proud.'

Steve shivered, his face turned Nancy with his eyes shut. His head fell back, exposing his neck the way Nancy knew he did when he wanted it to be licked and bitten. As expected, Jonathan's lips fell to the freckle that acted like a beacon, his tongue running flat over it. Unable to help herself, Nancy's slim, cool fingers stretched out and ghosted over Steve's cheekbone. His eyes flicked open, unfocused, pupils blown, just as he gave a whimpering moan.

As her eyes glanced down, she found Jonathan's hand slipping between the two of them, disappearing into the front of Steve's loose slacks. She couldn't see any more than that, their bodies pressed together and hiding the rest from view, but she could make sense of his pumping arm and the way Steve began to writhe, grasping at Jonathan as he bucked in time.

Nancy's breath came out as a shudder. Sucking her lower lip, her hand fell from Steve's face and dropped to the bed. Her fingers skittered across the bed and to her stomach. Her teeth sank into her lip as her hand slipped down further. She pulled up her skirt, over her knees and thighs, before slipping her hand in between. The heat radiated through her stockings, and as she pulled the elastic band away, she hitched her knees up closer to her chest. She didn't do this often, not even when she was alone and missing the sheer company of another person in her bed. And yet she found her fingers curving over the cotton of her briefs, a tiny, rasping breath passing her lips as

she found them damp from the sheer sight of her two best friends, her two ex-boyfriends, wrapped in one another's arms.

She knew how each of them felt, she knew the tell-tale signs of their heavy breathing. She saw the way Steve clenched his teeth and sucked down air like he was drowning, the way Jonathan snatched a hand and clasped it above their heads as he buried his face into the pillow beside Steve. Nancy knew their tastes and their sounds, as her fingers pressed and curled into her panties. She didn't dare go any further than that, even as she trembled and felt Steve's other hand grab at her skirt and tug at it as his hips bucked upwards with a cry that was cut off by kiss from Jonathan. Nancy rolled into her stomach, face on the pillow beside Steve's, and shivered as she felt them tremble beside her.

Gradually, Steve's grip on her woollen skirt loosened. Jonathan rolled off him, groping on her bedside table for the box of tissues, covered in a lacy, pink box. Nancy watched the two of them, her hair covering her face as she disentangled her hand from her stockings and wiped it clean on the inside of her skirt. No one had been smoking, and yet she still felt dizzy and warm, as though she were about to float right off the bed. She nearly asked Steve if he wouldn't mind holding her skirt again, out of fear she'd hit the ceiling if she shut her eyes. But the pleasant silence that filled the gaps of their *Thing* had built a web around them, and she stayed securely on the mattress beside them, until her breathing evened out and she trusted that gravity still worked.

*

Late April was unseasonably warm. She joined Steve one Saturday to dip her toes into his pool. Jonathan was at work, pulling extra shifts to save up for college. He wanted to live on campus, but Steve had convinced him they could afford a cheap apartment of their own. He had, after all, been working all year and living with his folks. Nancy nearly envied him that, before she found herself dreaming of the prospect of finding some friends who weren't merely ex-boyfriends or characters in a story she didn't even particularly like. She admired Steve, for somewhere surviving an additional year in Hawkins when so many would have escaped town by now.

'Have you decided your major yet?' she asked.

She had her feet in the pool, her shorts rolled up over her knees. Steve lay on the bricks beside her, shirt off and sunglasses on. The colour had returned to his skin, his dark freckles dancing over his body like a splatter of paint from the brush. She'd watched as Jonathan played connect-the-dots with them, his fingers dancing across his skin until he kissed each and every one. She'd watched them fall together twice now, losing their clothes as they writhed on her bed and she peered at them and clutched her pillow tight.

He was silent. He hadn't quite been able to lose the part in his hair, and it sent it flying everywhere, a constant cowlick curling over his crown.

'They have this programme, music therapy. That might be cool.'

Nancy didn't recognise it, but she didn't ask what it was. She could guess. When Steve continued, it was after a long pause.

'I'd like to work with kids.'

'Oh.'

'You still going to shave your head?'

Nancy lay back on the bricks. They were warm against her back, soaking through her shirt like the way the heat in her belly did when Jonathan and Steve were lost in one another. She never asked to join, and although their hands often found hers, or they tugged at her skirt or hair, they never invited her. An invisible line divided them as much as it kept them together. She felt they all preferred it that way; she knew she did.

Kicking her feet back and forth, she felt the water lap at her ankles. She flexed her toes, brought them out of the water, and then delved them back in. Steve's heels bobbed at the surface, occasionally knocking against her foot. She brought her feet up and raised the soles to the sky, feeling the blood rush down her legs. Steve turned to look, before doing the same. Water ran over her ankles and to her knees, soaking her rolled up cuffs.

'Why did you break up with Jonathan?'

She was quiet, considering the question. She wiggled her toes; Jonathan had painted them pink and black, clashing tones of delicateness and depression.

There were so many ways to answer that question. He was distant and withdrawn, never quite breaking from his self-built wall. She had found a mystery and a grace in it, but instead found herself being held at arm's length. She had watched him from afar for so long, wondering what it would be like to be the loner's girlfriend, and when she found herself there, she clawed to break out. The relationship had fizzled before it popped, and she had wondered, in the weeks afterwards, if perhaps she had been the outside all along. All through high school, she had tried to wedge her way in, particularly after Barbara's death. The waves parted for Jonathan with ease, while Nancy found herself cutting her way through. Although invitations came her way, she felt like an afterthought, someone who should be invited because they were always invited to those sorts of things.

'There was no chemistry,' she finally said.

Steve accepted her answer with a nod. He pulled his sunglasses off, rested them on the ground, and tossed his arm over his eyes. She looked over, wondering at the movement. She knew what question was coming up next.

'And us?'

'You cared too much.'

She watched him breathe. It was slow, his ribs expanding out and drawing in. His legs lowered first; when Nancy's fell back to the pool, a wave of pins and needles hit.

'He needs someone who cares.'

'He does.'

Moving over, she rested her head on Steve's chest. His heart beat easily, rhythmically, a steady beat to her ear. His arm draped over

her shoulders, fingers twisting in her hair much the way Jonathan's did. Once, she had imagined each of them to be a jigsaw piece that would fit in the sharp angles of her body. Now, she saw them both as curves, hands and hips and mouths joining neatly where there had been gaps in her own body.

*

Graduation was hot and uncomfortable. Nancy sweltered under the blistering May sun, looking over the back of the heads of her classmates, people she thought she once knew but now realised she didn't. Jonathan, sitting in the front row with the rest of the peers whose surnames began with A and ran through to D, bit at his nails and slumped in his seat. She had sat with him around the back of the gym half an hour before, as he'd smoked and bitched and teased her for not making valedictorian. She'd made the honour roll, though, a fact she shot back at him with a smug grin. He'd elbowed her playfully, quietly impressed but not endowing her with the same, heady praise he'd done with Steve when he was accepted into college.

There was a gap in their triad, but Steve publicly had no reason to attend. Even so, she found herself looking for him, and Jonathan did much the same. Although he didn't attend the ceremony, they found him after, sitting on the hood of Jonathan's car. He moved so much easier these days, though he hadn't quite found the fluidity of his high school days. Similarly, Jonathan smiled more, the corners of his eyes occasionally crinkling as he laughed. In these last few days of freedom, in this pocket of space where time was distorted, Nancy had carved a niche for herself. She could hold their hands as they kissed, crossing her legs as she watched them, intrigued and enamoured and breathless with the ghosts of her memories.

'You guys are such dorks,' he drawled, flicking Nancy's golden tassel so it swung backwards.

Jonathan had already pulled his off and was wrestling out of the gown, as soon as Joyce had let him flee from photographs and hugs.

'You were standing here, wearing this only last year,' she reminded him, whacking him with the mortarboard.

'Yeah, but I made it look cool. You guys just look like dweebs.'

They were meant to have separate plans. Nancy's family wanted her to spend the evening in with them, gushing about her future and what she was going to be taking to college. Joyce wanted to spend as much time with her boys as a group before they were sent flying in different directions. There were still months ahead of them, though, Nancy rationalised, and this *Thing* she and Steve and Jonathan had developed had started to develop a time limit. There was no guarantee it would handle the thousand or so miles to college.

The drove out to the edge of town, to farmland where the soil had been sucked dry of nutrients. A picnic blanket was laid down, a boombox holding down a corner, capes and mortarboards tossed in the trunk. Steve shucked his shirt and jeans, bundling them underneath his head so he could soak in the sun in only his briefs and sunglasses. Nancy watched, pulling at the hem of her shirt with a cautious desire to follow his carefree nature, with her own shyness winning out. Jonathan went as far as to to pull his shirt off, socks and shoes tossed aside and his bare feet digging into the sand. As he retreated to the car, Nancy lay down beside Steve, feeling the heat soak through her formal clothes.

At first she thought it was raining, There was a splatter of water on her arm and cheek, only a few drops here and there. Then a squawk, and Steve was up, swearing as he lunged as up and towards Jonathan. The bottle of water he'd been holding fell, making a perfect arc of water that fell down over her, slicing across her yellow dress like a sword. Sitting up, feeling it soak through, she grabbed the now-empty bottle and smacked it across his ankle. Steve had grabbed his jeans, laughing as he tried to drag him down, but Jonathan wasn't having any of it. A second bottle slipped from his hands and rolled across the blanket.

Leaping to her feet, Nancy gave a squeal as the boys went to lunge at each other. Steve was huffing, dripping with water, as he tried to wrestle Jonathan down. It was playful, each going to make a move and then backing off. Jonathan made to lunge and Steve grabbed at Nancy, trying to pull her in front. She slipped backwards, catching his elbow, and swung around behind him, snaking her arm around the other one. She pulled up behind him, holding him in place as

Jonathan grabbed the second bottle and poured the contents over his head.

'You ass!' Steve cried, giving a testing pull on Nancy's arms but with no effort to break free. 'I hate both of you! You are both scum, utter scum. Treacherous scum of the earth.'

'Quit your bitching,' Jonathan scolded, cupping Steve's cheeks and kissing him.

Nancy continued to hold his arms behind his back as she leant in to watch. She was just tall enough to perch her chin on Steve's shoulder if she rocked up onto her toes, watching as beads of water ran down his freckled cheek and jaw. Her grip on his arms loosened, and her hands danced around his waist to reach for Jonathan, hooking around his belt to pull him in. Steve was grinning, despite his protests, as Jonathan allowed himself to get pushed and pulled into place.

'You're ridiculous,' Steve muttered.

'Not as ridiculous as those sunglasses,' came Jonathan's reply.

She loved to watch them kiss. She had never quite appreciated the way Jonathan hungered for each one, nor the way Steve seemed to shiver into it, until she was separated from the very act itself. There was a gasping breath from Jonathan, right as Steve pressed their bodies together. Her eyes dropped, just long enough to find the buckle of his belt. The fraction of movement seemed to give Jonathan permission to pull at his jeans, fingers fumbling over Nancy's, as he left a trail of wet, open-mouthed kisses along Steve's throat and jaw, where he turned his head, offering up his neck for the taking.

Nancy was acutely aware of the way Steve's hands had slid around to her waist and tugged down the zip. She felt his hands, firm and certain, pulling back the elastic of her panties, each grabbing at the curve of her ass. She was never really touched in these moments, beyond a stroke of her hair, a grasp of her clothes as one or both of them lost themselves in the other's embrace. She didn't even particularly want to be touched, though sometimes her body physically ached for it. Watching was enough, her own hands

beginning to learn what she wanted and desired. Even so, she trembled as the heat in her belly surged as Jonathan's hands followed Steve's, pulling her in close so she could feel them rocking together. She wasn't there to join in, but to bracket Steve in place. Jonathan was rocking up against him, the slightest puff of air from Steve's mouth cottoning her into what was occurring as she remained locked in place.

The blanket had started to dry when they fell upon it. Jonathan kicked off his jeans and boxers, discarded as quickly as it took Steve to lose his briefs. It took Nancy longer to undress, looking over her shoulder and past the car until Jonathan pulled her down with them. Her bra strap slipped down her arm, and with Jonathan hiding her from view, she reached back and unclasped it. Shimmying out of her panties, already damp with desire, she curled up behind his body. They lay stretched out on the blanket in a row, her two boys grinding against one another and Nancy holding on from behind, their legs tangled together. She only wanted to watch, even as she kissed Jonathan's shoulder and brushed Steve's hair from his face.

Steve had always been noisy, had always been vocal with his desire, even when it had been Nancy's name he moaned. Nothing had changed, except perhaps the number of syllables, or the drawl as he tipped his head back, but he still made it abundantly clear he much he wanted it. Jonathan was the polar opposite, only soft puffs of air as he bucked into Steve's hand, a wavering suggestion of a moan as he writhed against Nancy. Her legs rubbed together as she watched over his shoulder, Steve's tanned hand wrapped around the pink, flushed skin of Jonathan's cock.

By now she could guess their movements. She watched as Steve's hands began to press at Jonathan's shoulders, and he worked his way down, kissing over the pale neck and chest. Nancy moved to her knees, sitting up, and pulled Jonathan with her. His head rested between her breasts, his eyes shut as Steve settled between his legs. It was strange to watch, and Nancy found herself staring, suddenly unable to compare it to anything else that she had experienced with either one of them at one time or another. There had been so many things she did know, she could recall and reflect on, but seeing Steve's lips wrap around Jonathan's cock, with a level of intimate

familiarity that spoke of practice and a long history.

She snaked an arm around Jonathan's chest, laying her hand flat on his sternum. With a leg either side of him, heels pressing into the ground, she coaxed him to relax against her. His breath came out in short, shuddering gasps as he groped about, threading his hands through Steve's hair and guiding his head. Nancy's eyes darted, from looking over Jonathan's blissed out expression and down to Steve, where he dragged his tongue over Jonathan's cock. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she pressed her breasts against Jonathan's back and allowed herself to slip a hand between her legs.

Her fingers combed over the dark curls between her legs, crooking inwards as she watched the scene before her. Jonathan's heart pounded beneath her hand, and Steve lifted his head just enough to open his eyes and meet Nancy's gaze. Raising his head, his lips spread into a toothy grin, before his eyes fluttered shut and his head fell once more. She was wet, sodden, her fingers slipping into heat as her thumb pressed to her clit. Rocking into her hand, she held the other to Jonathan's chest and moved in as close as she dared, mouth to his shoulder. Jonathan was huffing into her ear, Steve's hands alternating between gripping his hips and stroking him as he rested his jaw.

She didn't see Jonathan come, but she felt it. The ricochet through his body, the way he keened upwards and gulped down air like a drowning man. Her palm pressed into her head, the heel of her hand grinding upwards, as she lifted her hand from Jonathan's shoulder and coaxed his head into the crook of her neck. Her fingertips danced across his jaw, stroking it as his lips parted, eyes flickering behind the closed lids. She could hear Steve, noisy and greedy, mouth around Jonathan as he swallowed down all he had to offer.

The rest of the afternoon was spent lazily stretched out on the blanket. Jonathan's hands ran over Steve's body, kissing the hollows of his hips, the jut of his ribs, the cords of his throat. Nancy curled around whoever was closer, nipping at whatever skin was closest to her mouth at the time. She trembled around her own hand, silent except for the smallest cry of desperation as she brought herself off. The boys- *her* boys- didn't touch except to pull her into whatever position they were lying in. The sat her up so they could lean on her, brought her down to rest the head on her lap. She went willingly,

joyfully, until they were loose and heaving for air, the sun burning their naked skin.

*

Summer stretched out. The *Thing* , precious and fragile, which had developed in the sanctuary of Nancy's bedroom spilled out into the world. They met in the dying field, Nancy weaving together bouquets and crowns of dead and dying wheat. Steve sunbathed, nude or close to it, as Jonathan covered his sunburnt, peeling skin. Their days were slipping through their fingers, the hours of sunlight reminding them of how little time they truly had left. It was marked by her finishing *Dancers* , which left her a little empty once she closed the book.

They helped Steve pack, each one of his possessions reminding him of something he wanted to take. They whittled ten boxes down to two, although Nancy saw him hiding a third and fourth back in his closet. Jonathan had few belongings he wanted to take, having never been one for sentimentality. Nancy packed on her own, ignoring her mother's suggestions and recommendations.

The boys left first. She saw them off at the Byers home, kissing each of them on the cheek and waving alongside Joyce and Will. Joyce cried, Will asked if he could have the bigger room, and Nancy poked through the items that had been left behind. She found a half-smoked joint and an almost empty lighter. She lit it and lay on Jonathan's bed, feet to the corners and hands hanging over the edge, and tried to picture what it would have been like if the *Thing* had started its evolution here, two and a half years earlier as a monster chased them through the confines of this home.

Somehow word spread. She didn't know who uttered the words first; it hadn't come from her, Will wasn't the kind to speak of family secrets and Joyce would have never outed Steve. But the word grew like wildfire, and Hawkins became aflame in the gossip that Jonathan Byers and Steve Harrington had runaway together to live as fags. People spoke behind hands, their eyes tracking Nancy as she wandered the aisles of the grocery store, voices dropping low as she ordered a milkshake at the diner or elbowed one another as she bought a movie ticket for one.

Her mother cornered her, a week before she was due to leave. She was setting the table for dinner, and in her peripheral vision she could see Mike peering around the staircase to watch. He slunk back when he caught her turning towards him, but his feet still lingered on the step.

'Did you know?'

Nancy turned back to her mother, keeping her expression neutral as she placed the cutlery down.

'You were spending so much time with them. Did you know they were- that they were like that?'

'Like what?'

Her mother stopped to face her, standing on the other side of the table. She set the casserole dish down between them as Nancy folded a napkin and set it next to Mike's plate.

'Nancy. You're a smart girl. You must have known what was going on.'

She didn't reply. She could still smell grass and sand in her blouse. She still found pieces of dried wheat in the grooves of her shoes. Sheets of rolling paper and half a box of tobacco had been wedged in the crevices of her window sill, a roll of film deliberately hidden between her socks. She imagined herself as Amelia Underwood, and that there is no going back, only forward. She smiled, watching as her mother's face went from pink to red to white, and she excused herself to go wash up. She passed Mike on the step. He stood, as though burnt, and followed her.

'Dried cranberries,' he said from the bathroom doorway. 'That's what they are. Dried cranberries. Will told me. I didn't know.'

A week later, she kissed her family goodbye and flew to Rhode Island. The summer had caused time to dilate, and while the days had once been marked by sunsets and sunburns, it now sped up in a rhythm of rapidly filled notebooks and paper cuts. Her dorm room, shared with a girl that she shared nothing else with, became a

temporary shrine to their *Thing* on the weekends, as she cradled the phone and listened to Steve and Jonathan on the other end. There was no wall for her to rest her legs against, and so she made do with the bed, laying across the floor between piles of laundry and stacked books, a poor replica for her bedroom at home.

Jonathan gushed over his classes; Steve ummed and ahed in a way that suggested he had no idea what he was doing. Nancy signed up for clubs and groups and made an effort to check them all out once before finding herself in awash of classes and homework and assignments with ticking deadlines. Her Saturday nights circulated around the phone, the three of them filling each other in, and she lived for it, breathed for it, declining invitations out with people who might call her a friend.

And then one night Steve wasn't there for a call, and Jonathan explained he was at work, and it occurred to Nancy that Steve hadn't mentioned his classes for several weeks, and she had never asked why. The following month, Jonathan wasn't on the phone, and Steve remarked that he was back in Hawkins for a few days as Will had broken his arm after being pushed in soccer, and Nancy didn't even know Will was interested in sports, let alone on a team. It hit her, then, that she was still on the outside looking in, once again delegating herself to a position of never quite fitting in.

She never shaved her head.

The following week, she was invited to join the sci-fi and fantasy book club to discuss their latest book, *The Dancers at the End of Time*, the following Saturday. She hesitated, finding herself immediately going to say 'no'. But the word hang in her mouth, unuttered, and she pulled the well-worn book out of her bag. The cover had been bent in half, the pages thumbed through again and again. She hadn't really liked it, she decided. It had taken her almost a full year to read it. But she had loved the characters, in her own way. She agreed, mentioned she'd read it, and the discussion launched into other books, many that Nancy had never heard of or only knew by name.

After a few minutes, she worked up the nerve to ask if any of them had ever played Dungeons and Dragons. One of them, a boy who Nancy recognised from one of the clubs she had attempted to join at

the start of the semester, mentioned a friend of his was starting a campaign. He asked what character she'd want to play, and listed off a few classes that were already taken. She thought about it, considered the characters that had been played in Mike's game, and finally said she'd like to play a halfling rogue. She was given a time and day to meet up to roll her new character.

If the phone rang at the end of the week, she wasn't there to find out. And that, she found, was enough.